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Particularities of Knowledge Worker's Motivation Strategies in Romanian Organizations

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Abstract

The employees are the best competitive advantage that one organization could have, since all the other resources could be imitated. In this context, motivated employees are the key to efficiently keeping up with the market forces and sustain the success of any organization. This paper aims to identify the ways in which knowledge workers from Sibiu area are motivated and which are the modern ideas that could improve the current strategies. The article reviews the relevant literature regarding knowledge workers and suggests some guidelines for identifying the recurrent issues in motivating these precious resources, as well as some directions for further research.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the vital resource of an organization is people. Human resources are the organization; they are the ones that ensure the survival, development and advantage in the current competitive environment. The complex characteristics of human resource dynamics and their different approaches led to the separation of human resource management from the overall management of the company, becoming an independent discipline that requires a holistic, interdisciplinary approach of the staff within an organization.

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The new economic era and its challenges led to an acknowledgement of the importance of human resource management in general, and more recently it led to the differentiation between the employees that hold the most knowledge and the other ones. This means a more individualized strategy, designed for each employee, including a more well-structured motivation strategy.

Although the term “knowledge worker” is embedded in the vocabulary of management literature for such a long time, until recent years, nobody paid much attention to this term in Romania because no one saw the practical utility of it, or its’ real signification.

The effects of the new knowledge-driven economy are nowadays very visible and the need of adjusting to the changes more troubling. This is why changes have to take place now, because otherwise there is no chance that our national economy would survive the international competition. The mentioned adjustment also refers to developing new ways of managing the human resources. Unfortunately, this is an area that has always been neglected, but now the problems regarding human resources, especially with knowledge workers, are getting bigger and the Romanian organizations can’t afford to lose their best competitive advantage to the phenomena of brain-drain. This is the reason why, interacting, motivating and retaining knowledge workers in our organizations, is extreme important for the future development of our society.

2. Knowledge workers and the new challenges

Peter Drucker was the first one to ever use the term “knowledge worker” and when he did so, he meant a special type of employee who owns knowledge himself, rather than the organization. Since then (1959), many other specialists offered a wide range of definitions to this special resource of the new economic era, from “those who create knowledge” to “those who’s use of knowledge is a dominant aspect of their work”, to a more specific definition, almost universally accepted, provided by Davenport: “people with a high degree of education or expertise whose work primarily involves the creation, distribution, or application of knowledge”.

Abbasi considers that knowledge workers are those employees who add value to the organization because of what they know. When asking where does that knowledge of knowledge workers come from, Drucker considers that this type of high-level employees are those who apply the theoretical and analytical knowledge acquired thorough formal education, whereas Nickols develops the idea that a great portion of that knowledge could also come from informal sources of education, like experience in a very specialized area, organizational knowledge and access to external knowledge.

Other specialists have focused on distinguishing between different types of knowledge workers. The literature provides many examples in this sense, classifications that use different criteria like provenance of the knowledge (how did they obtain that knowledge?), percentage of usage (all tasks they perform imply transformation of knowledge?), the type of task and its’ level of creativity, the position in the organization etc.

The aspect that most specialists agree upon is where we can find these knowledge workers. There are a series of industries that are heavily based on knowledge and the activity of knowledge workers: information technology, telecommunication, communications, research and development, science and technology, biotechnology, life sciences, electronics, fabrication, venture capital, consulting, financial, and others like hotel, aviation, government and education (Horwitz et.al, 2003).

No matter which classification we consider to be the most accurate, when being a manager of an organization that aspires to progress, we have to stop and analyze the situation in which we find ourselves. It is of extreme importance to identify those persons that represent the organization’s biggest assets in a world where knowledge becomes increasingly valuable as it represents the content of the buying process, sales and production. As Peter Drucker stated, “the most valuable assets of a 20th-century company was its production equipment and that the most valuable asset of a 21st-century institution will be its knowledge workers” (Drucker, 1999) and this is the real challenge for nowadays managers. As the value of knowledge rises daily, we discover that knowledge workers cannot be managed in the traditional sense and that “knowledge management is likely to operate as a practice for managing people or information than as practice attuned towards facilitating knowledge creation” (Alvesson, 2001).

Fortunately, there is increasing evidence that, on an international level, particular organisations are beginning to acknowledge that distinctive HR practices lead to better knowledge worker performance (Horwitz et.al, 2003).

3. New views on motivating knowledge workers

Knowledge management becomes the focus of the organizations' efforts, but even though more and more organisations are investing in it, one big question remains without a clear answer: how to motivate people to actually contribute their knowledge?

Motivated employees are strategically important for corporate competitiveness and the motivation aspect is a vital part of being a manager since it is difficult to compete only on the basis of the usual resources of competitiveness like access to capital, technology and natural resources (Kumar S., 2011).

Special resources need special care, so the new type of human resource management, characteristic of knowledge-based organizations has several features that differ from traditional human resource management (Todoruț A., et al.). Among the most important ones are the intense differentiation approach, as specialists in human resources management have to individually consider each human resource involved in the organization, its characteristics, motivations and expectations and the manifestation of intense creativity in all human resource management processes in order to be able to develop appropriate solutions to the many new elements which are involved in the effective and efficient management of human resources.

Unfortunately, when it comes to motivating people there is no general formula that fits every organization and no commonly accepted model of motivation. This happens on one hand, because humans are complicated and on the other hand, because there isn't a right business model, organizational structure or management style.

Theories help us in our search of identifying some general features that, when properly combined, can lead to the most successful way of motivating somebody. The most well-known and commonly accepted motivation theories in business literature are those of Maslow, McGregor and Herzberg.

Maslow designed the hierarchy of needs, placing physiological needs at the lower levels. In that case, money is a motivator; however, it tends to have a motivating effect on employees that lasts only for a short period. At higher levels of the hierarchy, praise, respect, recognition, empowerment, and a sense of belonging are far more powerful motivators than money and have a longer-lasting impression in the mind of the employees. McGregor's opinion was that that management must embrace one of two and only two different ways of managing people: "Theory X" and "Theory Y", the latter being the only sound one. Herzberg differentiated hygiene factors from motivators in the length of time the particular factor continues to drive behaviours. According to him, the salary has a short motivational time span. "An employee might receive a pay raise today, and 30 days later begin to question when the next raise will be forthcoming".

Maslow placed money at the lowest level of the hierarchy and shows that other needs are better motivators to employees. McGregor placed money in Theory X category and considers it as a poor motivator, whereas praise and recognition are placed in the Theory Y category and are considered stronger motivators than money. Likewise, McClelland asserted that workers could not be motivated by the mere need for money and in fact, extrinsic motivation (money) could extinguish intrinsic motivation such as achievement motivation.

Keeping in mind the above mentioned theories, the individuals that work in the organization and the organization's characteristics, human resource managers need to find the perfect combination of instruments that guarantee a good motivation strategy for each knowledge worker.

Of course, the current economic climate represents a big influential factor because few employers can afford to throw money at staff with pay rises and big bonuses. But the pressure of talent war and brain drain can't be overseen so organizations must make sure their employees feel motivated. Because of this situation, managers try to avoid raising the salary and try to boost motivation by offering "free rewards". This concept was analyzed in a report by McKinsey & Company, *Motivating people: Getting beyond money*, published in November 2009. In a survey of executives, managers and employees, it found non-financial incentives, such as praise from a manager, attention from leaders and opportunities to lead projects were seen as more effective motivators than the financial incentives of bonuses, pay rises and stock options. For example, although cash bonuses were seen as effective by 60% of respondents, 67% saw praise from a manager as effective. Because of this, 'free' rewards such as more time off, unpaid sabbaticals and flexible working hours are becoming more popular. This is also a matter related to the organizational culture of a company and the way it values its staff.

Unfortunately, not many organizations make use of cost-effective nonfinancial motivators, although at a time when cash is hard to find. One of the reasons may be that many executives hesitate to challenge the traditional managerial wisdom that considers that money is what really counts. Other reason for not enough exploiting this area is that nonfinancial ways to motivate people require more time and commitment from senior managers and especially from human resource managers.

Benefits are a very sensitive because the removal of a once-received benefit alters the organization's relationship with that person because it indicates a reduction in the value of the effort of the knowledge worker. So, a benefit that cannot be sustained on a long term is better not offered at all because otherwise it will decrease the moral of the employee.

Benefit satisfaction reflects the discrepancy between the level and amount of benefits that employees actually receive and the level and amount of benefits that employees feel they should receive. This brings us to the other aspect: the need of constantly investigating the needs and the satisfaction level of the employees

Usually, employees tend to estimate benefits thru two different perspectives: a monetary one and a non-monetary one (Weathington; Jones, 2006). In the first category are valued benefits like medical insurance or sports subscription, whereas in the second category we find benefits like retirement plans or free participations at conferences. Of course, these are general tendencies, but every employer that is really preoccupied with this aspect, should learn how each type of benefits is perceived by its' employees. If a benefit that is been valued at a monetary level is considered to be below than the accepted average in the minds of the employees, they will feel that the organization is not treating them fairly, and they will not be committed to fulfilling their tasks.

The administration of cafeteria-style plans in which employees are able to choose from different types or levels of benefits would be the best option in theory, but in practice, employers often do not offer a choice to the employees. In considering benefit satisfaction and value, it is necessary for organizations to consider factors leading up to the variables of interest and the outcomes that result from those factors. Organizations should recognize the need to evaluate both, the benefit package as a whole and, the individual benefits that are critical in terms of cost, organizational culture, visibility, or other factors.

(Weathington, Jones, 2006).

Another high motivator, especially for young knowledge workers, is the training opportunity that the organization offers. Training is an instrument that allows the generation and accumulation of human capital and the universalistic approach says that there is a direct relationship between training and performance. This perspective defends the existence of universally recognized training practices that, introduced by any organization regardless of external or internal circumstances, will always have a positive effect on performance (Danvila del Valle; Sastre Castillo, 2009).

Every organization should adopt a set of training policies. Normally, the return on training will be greater than the investment, since it will increase productivity because, if employees sense an interest on the part of the organization in offering them training, demonstrating trust in them and an intention to count on them in the long-term, they will respond by making a greater effort and being more efficient in the course of their duties.

Under these circumstances, training should be an important element in the creation of human capital and included in each organizations' strategy firstly because the investment in training can create a moral debt among employees who receive said training and secondly because in the event that rival companies are able to imitate training programs, they will only be able to achieve similar performance in the long-term and the advantage obtained can be maintained for a period of time (Tzafrir, 2005).

One of the most delicate reasons why it is so important to maintain knowledge workers motivated is that every organization wants that the tacit knowledge held by employees to be transformed in explicit knowledge and shared among the organization. Although there have been some researchers such as (Szulanski, 1996), that did not consider that motivation is an important factor for knowledge transfer, other researchers, (Schulz; Klugmann, 2005) have always underlined the importance of acknowledging motivation as a key factor in the successful knowledge transfer and prosperity within an organization. This is another difficult task for the managers since there are no easy formulas.

This type of transformation is influenced by a series of factors which include organizational structure, organizational culture, the relationship between top management and knowledge workers, the control level, the informatics systems that provide communication and storage of the knowledge, and off course, the willingness of every knowledge worker to communicate and work in teams. The more an institution supports the principles of self-organization openly, the more social capital and tacit knowledge it will generate which, in turn, will lead to increased

levels of innovation, commitment and entrepreneurship. The more an institution embraces self-organization rather than a hierarchical system, the more social capital it will generate (Ehin, 2008).

A manager's ability to provide knowledge workers with the personalized goals, motivation and tools they need to perform at their best will bring outstanding results (Massaro, 2011). In conclusion, managers have to be more flexible in their managerial style. When it comes to knowledge workers, the context plays an important part in the equation because they are by definition persons that cherish autonomy and management is sometimes reluctant in providing them with space. Management that is very lenient may provide employees with too little guidance, which increases the risk that these specialists will lose focus on the company's priorities, but, on the other hand, supervision that is too stringent can be destructive to workers' creativity and morale and can have negative effects on their performance (Massaro, 2011).

Every manager needs to find the balance between these two extremes and to understand the needs of knowledge workers, their ideological tensions and their individual motivations. Once aware of these characteristics, managers must adapt accordingly to improve employees' efficiencies by assigning them duties that closely match their primary interests and goals and channel their efforts towards objectives that are common for them and the organization.

Knowledge workers are motivated by challenge; to believe in the organization's mission, they need to see it as a contribution to their "intellectual status". (Massaro, 2011).

When knowledge workers understand and support their company's mission, they are more inclined to consider its accomplishment a milestone of their work, and the more connected one feels to a project and its implications, the more motivated he or she is likely to be. Managers should reduce the number of formal meetings with structured agendas, keep scientists away from bureaucratic tasks and leave knowledge workers free to fulfill their responsibilities as they see fit, with minimal direction from their supervisors (Massaro, 2011).

Communication is an aspect that is vital for managing people. This is the only way in which a manager could assess which type of motivation method he needs to use and also one of the main channels for supporting all the developed activities in this perspective. The creation of familiar ties between managers and workers is a fundamental aspect of HR management in every knowledge company. Informal communication, caring and constructive behaviors and professionalism are crucial, as they enable managers and scientists to learn about each other and their work, thus providing the foundation for collaboration (Massaro, 2011).

As Longnecker described, motivation is not just a way to get people to pursue organizational goals, it is the mean of determining people to "take ownership of the organization's needs as well as their own". Keeping this in mind, strategies like appreciation of achievement, individual attention, and empowerment can be the most effective way of motivating them and creating a bond between organization and the employee in the sense that the objectives of the latter will become congruent with the organizational ones.

4. Methodology

The research of the motivation strategies is conducted on a sample of 26 knowledge workers from Sibiu area. The workers selected activate in organizations belonging to industries considered to be centred on knowledge workers: telecommunication, education, financial, cultural, services and technology. 57 % of them are employed in organizations with more than 100 employees.

The survey was offered to knowledge workers that are knowledge handlers, but also knowledge creators; they don't just work with information, they have to transform it into new ideas and outcomes.

The data were collected by a questionnaire and in general, the questions were developed in order to provide information regarding: the type of motivation that their organization uses, their satisfaction with the offered benefits and their desires, the volume of trainings and team-buildings they are provided with. Appropriate statistical methods have been used for data analysis, supported by the SPSS program.

5. Findings

The research investigates effective HR strategies and practices for motivating knowledge workers and the main objectives of the study are:

- to determine which are the motivation stimuli that have the biggest impact on knowledge workers' motivation;
- to determine which are the most popular benefits included in the benefits package for knowledge workers in Sibiu area;
- to determine whether knowledge workers feel involved in the evolution of the organization they belong to;
- to identify the reasons why employees are not satisfied with the offered benefits;

Based on the literature review and research objectives, a structured questionnaire was designed for gathering data, with two major sections. The first one covers the problem of identifying the stimuli that create the biggest impact on knowledge workers' motivation. The second part was designed in order to gather information about the current motivation characteristics of knowledge workers, the strategies applied and the problems that organizations are confronted with from this perspective.

In order to measure the stimuli with the highest impact on knowledge workers' motivation, it was used a semantic differential rating scale with a 5 points bipolar adjectival scale, which is usually designed to measure the connotative meaning of concepts, see the table no. 1.

Table 1. Different stimuli and the mean value of the impact

Stimuli	Mean
Liberty of planning the work	4.27
Type of work	4.23
Working condition	4.19
Colleagues	4.12
Good communication with top management	3.96
Salary	3.96
Recognition of achievements by management	3.85
Benefits package	3.62
Promotion opportunities	3.54
Training opportunities	3.73
Organization's policy	3.15
Low control	2.96

When asked to identify the stimuli that they consider to have the biggest impact on their motivation level, the liberty of planning the work had the highest mean, 4.27, followed by the type of work, with a mean of 4.23, the working conditions with a mean of 4.19 and colleagues with 4.12. These results are not surprising and are consistent with the literature which suggests that one of the most important characteristics of knowledge workers is their desire for autonomy, their specialization and dedication for what they are doing and their tendency of preferring team work.

Other stimuli that have an influence on knowledge workers' motivation are a good communication with top management and the salary, with the same mean of 3.96. The average mean of salary variable is also consistent with the theory that financial motivators are important for motivation, but definitely not the most important for knowledge workers.

The stimuli with average impact on knowledge workers' motivation are the recognition of achievements by management (3.85) the benefits package (3.62), promotion opportunities (3.54), training opportunities (3.73) and the organization's policy (3.15). All five of the mentioned variables achieved means above 3 which means that they are not neutral factors when it comes to employee motivation and managers should invest more resources in using this type of motivators.

The lowest mean (2.96) was that for low control, which is surprising considering that knowledge people in general do not appreciate being controlled. This result might be explained by the way in which control is managed in Romanian local companies.

Further on, by using a Likert-type scale with five items, knowledge workers were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with four sentences that will help define commitment of knowledge workers towards their work and the type of relationship between the employees and organization.

With a mean of 4.08, knowledge workers consider that what they do is very important for the organization and there is a positive correlation between this variable and the good communication with top management variable at a level of significance of 0,423 (Spearman coefficient). Knowledge workers want to be engaged, challenged, and valued. If the organization doesn't give them that sense of purpose, the vision of achieving a better future, it will not capture their pride and their commitment (Baker, 2008). This comes to underline the importance of having a good relationship between top management and knowledge workers, a relationship sustained through both-ways formal but also informal communication. Communication is also the key to assuring that the strategy and objectives of the organization are understood by all the key employees. In this case, with a mean of 4, employees state that they are fully aware of the organization's objectives for the current year. This is always good news and should be a situation desired by every manager because this alignment between personal objectives and the objectives of the organization is the only way in which knowledge workers are willing to use their full knowledge for achieving the set goals.

Employees feel appreciated when top management has time to listen to them and this is a constant reminder that what they do is very important to the company. Employees who acknowledge that are the ones more willing to create more ideas based on it and more likely to share their knowledge with their colleagues and transform it from tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. From this perspective, the knowledge workers from this study consider that their opinions are taken into consideration with a mean of 3.85.

An important objective of the study was to identify the most used benefits for the motivation of knowledge workers. Unfortunately, 30% of the respondents stated that they do not receive any kind of benefit. The others were familiarized with the benefits suggested in the study as seen in figure no.1.

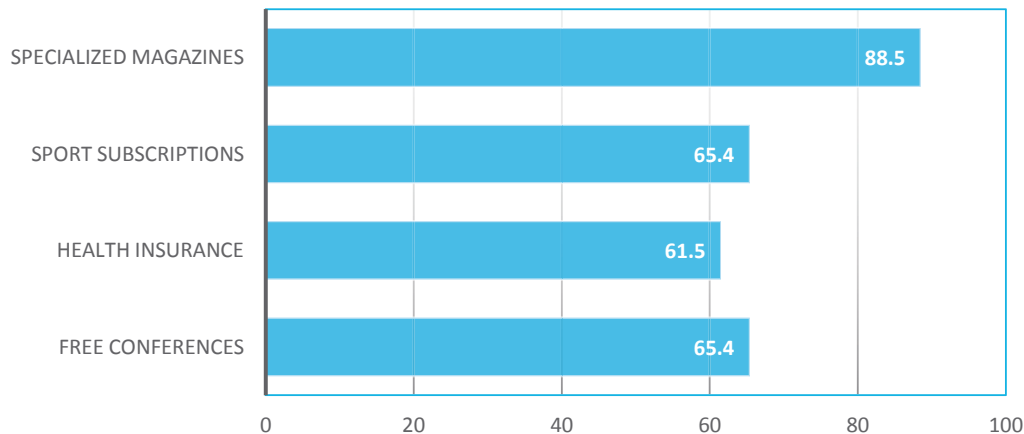


Fig. 1. Benefits offered to knowledge workers

Other types of benefits suggested by the knowledge workers are other medical packages, restaurant discounts, free transportation, foreign languages classes, dance classes, gifts for birthdays, birth of children, invitations to cultural events, and discounts for products of business partners of the organization.

All of these benefits prove that most managers are trying to compensate for the shortcuts from the financial part by creating benefits packages not necessarily expensive, but with a high impact on motivation from a moral point of view. Unfortunately, not all of their efforts are well-channelled. In this study, a five point semantic differential was employed in order to find out the level of satisfaction that knowledge workers feel towards the benefits package that they receive and the 3.12 mean is not at all to be considered satisfactory. This finding has a positive correlation (0.74 Pearson correlation) with the variable that describes how often knowledge workers are asked about what they would like to have as benefits. This indicates a serious communication problem and underlines the fact that the managers' efforts are misplaced.

Another five point semantic differential was designed in order to obtain data about the frequency with which management evaluates the knowledge workers concerning their general satisfaction and their alignment with the strategy and objectives of the organizations. The results are disappointing because the means of the two variables are 1.92 (general satisfaction level), respectively 2.12 (alignment with organization's objectives).

Keeping in mind the autonomy that characterizes knowledge workers, the researchers tried to find out, through another semantic differential, if these special employees would be more motivated if they could fulfil their tasks without having a fixed schedule. As predicted, with a mean of 4.85, knowledge workers would be more satisfied if they had a flexible schedule. Knowledge workers, especially innovation workers, do not like to be specifically told what to do and how to do it. Being given what they need to get the job done and told when it needs to be finished is thought to be enough (Davenport, 2005).

Other troubling aspects are the facts that 46 % of knowledge workers did not participate in any team buildings last year and 38.5% did not benefit from any trainings last year. This is another indication that human resource managers do not always have the necessary resources to provide basic needs, not even for the most valuable employees.

6. Further research

The presented research is just a small part of a much bigger exploratory mission for identifying the best methods of adjusting motivation strategies to each organization and respectively to each employee. Also, a larger research should reflect the importance of the human resource department and the necessity that its' strategy should derive directly from the main strategy of the organization.

A suggested direction is the research of the attributes and perceptions of knowledge workers of themselves as important determinants of their organizational commitment and the best HR practices to attract and retain them.

7. Conclusions

The acknowledgement of the importance of a proper human resource management is imperative for any organization that aspire progress.

While monetary rewards certainly have an important role to play, managers should consider the lessons of the crisis and think about the best alternative ways to engage and inspire employees.

A strategy that emphasizes the frequent use of the right nonfinancial motivators is the best solution for human resource managers for surpassing the problems caused by the financial crisis and providing knowledge workers with an environment that motivates them to use their knowledge for the achievement of the organization's objectives.

The lack of interaction between managers and their people creates a highly damaging situation that affects employee engagement and therefore manager's efforts should include communication at an informal level in order to create a bond between the employee and the organization, a working relationship that is both personal and professional, one that is built on trust. Managers need to recognize remarkable talent, set clear objectives and performance metrics for each employee, and provide incentives and rewards that match each individual's motivations.

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